



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE ARTIST AS FACILITATOR: BEING PRESENT WITH & LOVING THE UNKNOWN

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Everything is hard: everyone is their own kind of asshole:
still you have to keep doing good in the world.

These are some ideas navigating good, about cultivating goodness,
about art, facilitation and presence,
as means of navigating ethical responsibility,
especially to all the things.

It is not a catchall, a universal declaration of Universal and Forever and Fuck Everything Else
Goodness: it is some ideas, accompanied by examples, expansions and attributions.

Everything is hard: we need multiple tools, cultures, avenues of growth. Everything is not included
here. But I do discuss some tools for navigating Everything.

To begin: artists are facilitators of meaning.

Facilitation here means not just the khaki-and-whiteboard meeting context. It means supporting
an exchange, of attempting understanding. Between people, and between things. Because we're
sharing space with a lot of things, and those things both effect our own health and well-being, and
deserve to be heard for their own sake.

To be heard and understood is a fundamental human need, so fundamental that its lack creates conflict, leading to violence, terrorism, and other misunderstandings and extremisms, which themselves (the “things” of misunderstanding and extremisms) desperately, frustratingly, call out to be heard and understood.

Facilitation: to lead (a discussion).

A tool for understanding.

A good facilitator has the capacity to manage multiple perspectives. They ensure that all participants in a conversation have an equal voice, that no one voice dominates the conversation. They manage the use and experience of time (CDC 2015).

This includes the facilitation of *things*. Things are alive (Bennett 2010), they are mutually entangled, defined by one another (Barad 2003). *Things* include invisible, intangible concepts—like ideas, memes, social constructs (Bogost 2012).

Let’s look at a few examples.

This is an act of Facilitation:



Discourse: Projector: Plant: Filter (2015), Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery. Still from video documentation by Lal Avgen.

I am directing the can of air to breathe onto the microphone. Later I will clean out the projector's air filters with the can of air, and direct it to smell the flowers. It is a precise and futile breath-based endeavor. I saw OOUR perform "IWALY" two years earlier.

When we think of material and concept through our art work, non-human things develop *presence*. They are alive—they *perform*, and *all art is implicated within performance* (Beitiks 2013). Regardless of whether it is sculpture, video, sound, installation—the presence of the non-human in art is central and ubiquitous, and the artist is ethically implicated in its management and engagement.

This is also an act of Facilitation:



IWALY (2013), a performance by Selma Banich, an OOUR production. Photo by Daniele Wilmo.

While watching the piece by OOUR, I had an excruciating experience of presence, a total attunement to the simple, powerful, deliberate gestures that Selma made, and a very subtle and visceral connection to the tabletop surface. I saw Robin Deacon perform Stuart Sherman's tabletop work about a year earlier.

The Performing Table

Imagine I am attempting to facilitate an exchange with a table. I can sit or stand on a table. (An old adage from theater school: never build a piece of furniture that can't withstand the weight of an actor). I can place other objects on the table. I can smush my face against the table, and so on, you get it. My understanding of the table is in part defined by its size, shape and material, and it is in part defined by its context, both culturally, and within my own perception. I can see and understand a table as coherent with or disparate from its surroundings based on its size and shape. I can understand it as a kitchen table, a workbench, a dining table, a black basic table, a placeholder for a generic or Western Table.

Many meanings of the table can coexist simultaneously. It takes only a shift in a performer's tone, or cadence, body posture, maybe a change in light, sound or position, to completely transform my understanding of the table. It is the same table. It has the same size, shape, quality. It has not transmogrified into something else. The table could be split into two tables simultaneously, kitchen and desk, moving and not-moving, dining and workbench. It could even represent not-table—a bed or rock, without changing physical form. Each of these meanings is in part constructed by the performer's movements, gestures, emotions and environments, and the composition of light, sound, space.

If the world is a dialogue between human and non-human, including things that are *also themselves* language and communication, then art is a framework that takes us out of that everyday space, and creates alternate spaces for this communication.

Within this framework, meaning is facilitated, by artists. Who must attempt to understand the entities in dialogue—in order to be responsible facilitators.

This proves to be pretty damned difficult when the thing you are trying to understand is a table.

In "The Third Table" (2012), Graham Harman expands upon physicist Arthur Eddington's concept of two tables, as experienced by humans. Eddington argues that within the same object exists a table of *everyday experience*, and a table of *science*—consisting mostly of empty space. Harman's table exists somewhere in between. "The arts are in a unique position to give us the third table. They can never give it to us directly—there is no direct access to reality" (Harman 2014 15:05). The real is something that can be "loved, but never fully known." Art opens space for the love that comes from attention, attunement, the recognition of other.

Anthony Howell embodies that kind of love in a review of performance artist Stuart Sherman's work.

I have never seen so much happen in so short a time, but I am unsure of what I have seen [...]. Anyway, I go to a nearby bar to mull over what I remember. I have to make a phone call. I go to the phone, put down my drink on the ledge, pick up the phone, put it down while I unzip my jacket, search for my address book, my dime, my specs, pick up the phone, insert the time, dial, pick up my drink—and there I am perceiving myself doing this, coping with the myriad procedures of living. (Howell 1999, 75)

Howell's experience of Sherman's work has led him to reconsider his own relationships with objects. Robin Deacon would later re-perform Stuart Sherman's work in "Approximating the Art of Stuart Sherman," a dedicated rendition of object-based interactions. I would help document this performance for Deacon's documentary of Sherman's work, "Spectacle: A Portrait of Stuart Sherman."

Several years later I would put a table in a shed with a bull.

This is an act of Facilitation:



Approximating the Art of Stuart Sherman (2009), Robin Deacon. Courtesy of the artist.

Presence: Present: The Present

I can love a table, I can reflect on my relationship to a table. But is the table “present” in my conversation? What space does it occupy in the exchange artists facilitate?

Harman claims “The nature of objects is to withhold themselves” (1:28:20). Put another way, objects are *not present*.

Timothy Morton (2013) argues, “What is called the *present* is simply a reification, an arbitrary boundary drawn around things by a particular entity—a state, philosophical view, government, family, electron, black hole” (93). Here as in *right now, this moment*, is a false definition, according to Morton—an imaginary boundary.

But in terms of theater, or performance—the media, the discipline, the art form—to *be present* is a very real thing. It is, in fact, often a state performers seek out. To *have presence* means to occupy space, to be in tune with all that is and is happening, to encompass a special quality that is engaging to the viewer.

This moment of awareness, this achievement of presence, opens up avenues for listening. When a thing *has presence*, we as audience members feel attuned, connected with it. When a thing is *present*, we have an almost-inarticulable understanding of its being. We may not be able to describe its history or biography, but we are in communication with it. The work of performance, of artmaking, that points itself to the cultivation of presence, becomes a necessary act of facilitation. We achieve something akin to understanding.

Describing presence primarily as “the inter-relational tool through which the subject networks (and is networked by) the external world,” Gabriella Giannachi (2012, 54) articulates her definition of the term through research in cognitive science. Presence is a heightened experience of a performer/thing, an experience that reminds us of our entwined existence. It is, according to Giannachi, “an ecological process that marks a moment of awareness of the exchanges between the subject and the living environment of which they are part” (54–55).

Performance-presence and ecological-presence enact “moments of awareness” in the work.

This is also an act of Facilitation:



Systems of Pain/Networks of Resilience (New York) (2016).

I left a table in a shed with a bull. I walked away to get my gear, and when I came back, the bull was nuzzling the table. This went on for several minutes. I watched, entranced. I spent a lot of time wondering about the bull and the table.

In developing an artwork, by a human, and largely for an audience of humans, a facilitator might be straining, reaching, grasping, for a connection to the table as-it-is, for an experience of the objects' *presence*. Even if they have no way of accessing the "reality" of the table, they do have some control over light, composition, sound, structure, the gaze of the audience. Some experience of its being. This is where the hard work of opening space for empathy comes in.

Unrequited Empathy

Anthropomorphism is a tool that is debatable in its usefulness. On the one hand, it's an unavoidable projection of human experience onto the non-human, potentially clouding our ability to regard the non-human as-it-is. On the other hand, it extends and expands our experience of empathy. Jane Bennett (2010) writes, "We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (xvi). We need a tool to expand our human-centered perspective.

There is at least one social study that confirmed that anthropomorphism does indeed prompt the consideration of non-human perspectives.

Compared to participants who remained detached, participants instructed to take the perspective of the imperiled bird or tree reported stronger empathic feelings toward those objects, and toward the environment as a whole. These empathic feelings translated into a greater willingness to help the environment: The people prompted to feel empathy wanted to give more money to environmental causes than did the other study participants. (McIntyre 2007)

This projection of perspective is not the same as truly knowing a table (whatever that means). But it is a useful attempt, a meaningful action. And our understanding of plant-animal-table is influenced, in part, by our cultural exposure to these things—our experience of them and their experiences in images, in artworks, in our everyday lives. My understanding of a table is shaped, in part, by the art I have seen with tables (performed by Selma Banich, by Robin Deacon, by Stuart Sherman, a bull in upstate New York). I can acknowledge these influences and still stay attuned with my own unique perspective.

How then, as artists, are we present with the non-human? How do we listen to it, open up room for it? *How does the work ask the viewer to consider the perspective of the non-human?*

We can begin by simply asking ourselves, within the creative process, to consider the material's *presence* as an articulation of its own perspective. We can consider the potential influence of the work on perspectives toward non-humans. We can care for the material *beyond its responsibility to the work*. We can *consciously navigate* the potential diplomatic and ecological impact of the work. We can facilitate the human-non-human relationship. Be with things. Care for things. Listen to things. Try not to be an asshole to things. Give space to things on what could be their own terms.

To facilitate *well* is to be painfully self-aware, to own our own faults, mistakes, and limitations. To redirect our attention to the voices of those who haven't been heard or understood—to those for whom being heard or understood wasn't even being recognized as a need—with the elusive and impossible goal of creating greater understanding between all entities. To make work that makes space for us to be present with one another. To love things we may never fully know.

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Biography

Meghan Moe Beitiks is an artist working with associations and disassociations of culture/nature/structure. She analyzes perceptions of ecology through the lenses of site, history, emotions, and her own body in order to produce work that analyzes relationships with the non-human. She received her BA in Theater Arts from the University of California, Santa Cruz and her MFA in Performance Art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She was a Fulbright Student Fellow, a recipient of the Claire Rosen and Samuel Edes Foundation Prize for Emerging Artists, and a MacDowell Colony fellow. She is currently an Interdisciplinary Studio Art Lecturer at the University of Florida. www.meghanmoebeitiks.com

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